

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method of operating a network access server, the method comprising:
 - examining, using a first processor in the network access server, one or more header fields from one or more headers of a received egress packet;
 - 5 determining, based on the examination of the header fields, a second processor responsible for processing that egress packet, the second processor selected from a plurality of forwarding processors in the network access server; and
 - passing the egress packet to the second processor.
- 10 2. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
 - maintaining a master routing table at a route switch controller within the network access server;
 - maintaining a distributing routing table at the first processor, the distributing routing table containing entries from the master routing table that allow
 - 15 determination of the appropriate second processor for egress packets; and
 - maintaining a forwarding routing table at each forwarding processor, the forwarding routing table for a particular forwarding processor containing entries from the master routing table that allow that forwarding processor to process
 - packets for network access sessions assigned to that processor.
- 20 3. The method of claim 2, wherein maintaining a distributing or forwarding routing table comprises the route switch controller sending routing table updates to the processor associated with that routing table, and that processor updating that routing table.

4. The method of claim 2, wherein the distributing routing table comprises a voice port table and a tunnel session table, wherein determining a second processor comprises, when the egress packet is addressed to the access server itself:
 5. determining if the egress packet is a voice packet or a tunnel packet;
 - when the egress packet is a voice packet, looking up the second processor in the voice port table; and
 - when the egress packet is a tunnel packet, looking up the second processor in the tunnel session table.
- 10 5. The method of claim 2, further comprising, when the second processor cannot be determined from the distributing routing table, punting the packet to the route switch controller.
- 15 6. The method of claim 1, wherein passing the egress packet to the second processor comprises prepending a switching header to the data packet, passing the egress packet to a switching fabric, and switching the egress packet through the switching fabric to a port connected to the second processor, the switching fabric using the switching header to route the egress packet.
- 20 7. A data network access server comprising:
 - multiple ingress ports, each ingress port having the capability to support data communication over one or more access sessions associated with that port;
 - at least one egress port to facilitate packet data communication with a data network;
 - 25 a plurality of forwarding engines to process data packets received by the access

server and forward processed packets toward an appropriate ingress or egress port, each forwarding engine having the capability to support data communication over a plurality of ingress port access sessions; and

5 a distribution engine to examine header data for data packets received at the egress port and to distribute each such packet to the forwarding engine supporting data communication for the ingress port access session associated with that packet.

8. The access server of claim 7, further comprising a switching fabric in communication with each of the forwarding engines and with the distribution 10 engine, the distribution engine distributing data packets to the forwarding engines by passing each data packet to the switching fabric, along with a switching fabric identifier that allows switching of that data packet across the switching fabric to the forwarding engine supporting data communication for the ingress port access session associated with that data packet.

15 9. The access server of claim 8, wherein the switching fabric comprises a dedicated interface for each forwarding engine.

10. The access server of claim 9, further comprising:

20 a plurality of line card connection points, wherein a variable number of line cards can be connected to the access server, each line card selected from the group of line cards comprising an ingress port/forwarding engine module, a signal processing resource/forwarding engine module, and an ingress port/signal processing resource/forwarding engine module; and

25 a backplane comprising a time-domain multiplexed bus for communication of

time-domain multiplexed data between line cards, and a dedicated packet data connection for each line card connection point, connecting that line card connection point to one of the dedicated interfaces of the switching fabric.

- 5 11. The access server of claim 7, further comprising a route switch controller to manage access sessions associated with the ingress ports.
12. The access server of claim 11, the route switch controller having the capability to maintain a data packet master routing table and provide routing table updates from 10 the master routing table to the forwarding engines and the distribution engine.
13. The access server of claim 11, the route switch controller comprising a default forwarding engine, each of the other forwarding engines and the distribution engine having the capability to send a data packet to the default forwarding engine 15 when the appropriate route for that data packet is unknown to the forwarding or distribution engine attempting to route that data packet.
14. The access server of claim 7, the distribution engine having the capability to distribute data packets, tunneled packets for a tunnel session terminated at the 20 access server, and voice packets for a packet voice session terminated at the access server, the distribution engine comprising a classifier to determine, from a data packet's header data, whether that data packet can be classified as a tunneled packet or a voice packet.

25 15. A data network access server comprising:

data packet communication means for interfacing with a packet data network;

multiple network access means for communicating data associated with a plurality of network access sessions across an access network;

multiple forwarding means for processing data packets and then forwarding

5 those data packets toward either the data packet communication means, for ingress packets, or toward one of the network access means, for egress packets, each forwarding means associative with multiple network access sessions and at least one network access means and performing data packet processing and forwarding related to those associations; and

10 distributing means for distributing data packets received from the packet data network to the forwarding means responsible for processing those packets, the distributing means determining the forwarding means responsible for processing a particular data packet by examining one or more header fields from one or more headers of that data packet.

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16. The data network access server of claim 15, further comprising route switch control means for managing network access sessions and for supplying the distributing means with information to match data packets with their associated forwarding means.

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17. An apparatus comprising a computer-readable medium containing computer instructions that, when executed, cause multiple processors to perform a method for processing data packets in a network access server, the method comprising, for an egress packet:

25 examining, using a first processor in the network access server, one or more

header fields from one or more headers of the egress packet;
determining, based on the examination of the header fields, a second processor
responsible for processing that egress packet, the second processor selected from a
plurality of forwarding processors in the network access server;
5 passing the egress packet to the second processor;
preparing the egress packet using the second processor; and
forwarding the egress packet, using the second processor, towards an access
network port associated with that packet.

10 18. The apparatus of claim 17, wherein the method further comprises, for an ingress
packet received at its associated forwarding processor:
 preparing the ingress packet, using the second processor, for transport across a
data network; and
 forwarding the ingress packet, using the second processor, toward a packet
15 data network port.

19. The apparatus of claim 17, wherein the method further comprises:
 maintaining a master routing table at a route switch controller within the
network access server, the table capable of storing associations for multiple
20 network access sessions, each association identifying an access network port and a
forwarding processor with a network access session;
 maintaining a distributing routing table at the first processor, the distributing
routing table containing entries from the master routing table that allow
determination of the appropriate second processor for egress packets; and
25 maintaining a forwarding routing table at each forwarding processor, the

forwarding routing table for a particular forwarding processor containing entries from the master routing table that allow that forwarding processor to forward packets for network access sessions assigned to that processor.

- 5 20. The apparatus of claim 19, wherein maintaining a distributing or forwarding routing table comprises the route switch controller sending routing table updates to the processor associated with that routing table, and that processor updating that routing table.
- 10 21. The apparatus of claim 19, wherein the distributing routing table comprises a voice port table and a tunnel session table, wherein determining a second processor comprises, when the egress packet is addressed to the access server itself:
 - 15 determining if the egress packet is a voice packet or a tunnel packet;
 - when the egress packet is a voice packet, looking up the second processor in the voice port table; and
 - when the egress packet is a tunnel packet, looking up the second processor in the tunnel session table.
- 20 22. The apparatus of claim 19, the method further comprising, when the second processor cannot be determined from the distributing routing table, the first processor punting the packet to the route switch controller.
- 25 23. The apparatus of claim 17, wherein passing the egress packet to the second processor for processing comprises prepending a switching header to the egress

packet, passing the egress packet to a switching fabric, and routing the egress packet through the switching fabric to a port connected to the second processor, the switching fabric using the switching header to route the data packet.

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